



**Noel's (Dis)abled Fairy Tale Life: A Graphic Novel for
Disability Inclusion Curriculum**

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ISSN 1470 – 9570

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This article proposes Mikael Ross's novel *Der Unfall* (2018) as part of an inclusive curriculum in a German as a Foreign Language classroom that allows space for a general and non-threatening discussion of disability. *Der Unfall*, a graphic novel with fairy tale tropes, documents in word and image the protagonist Noel's life-changing experiences and showcases a protagonist with a disability. Noel's disability limits the vocalization of his emotions, since his physical experiences in the real world contradict how he mentally processes the transformation of his living arrangements. His consistent and safe world vanishes when his mother suffers a head injury that results in a coma. Despite his inability to communicate verbally how he interprets the alterations to his previously stable environment; readers gain insight into his mental state through the novel's visual juxtaposition of real-life events and his mental interpretation of how he comes to terms with the changes to his life. The dialogic images, and not just the printed words, are essential to deciphering the narration. This visual support makes this graphic novel accessible to learners of German at the beginner's level, who otherwise could not process a topic as complex and challenging as disability.

1. Introduction

Reading contemporary German graphic novels – a sub-genre of comics – involves making meaning from richly textured, juxtaposed images combined with written text in deliberate sequences, thus promoting the development of critical visual analysis and literacy. Graphic novels, unlike comics, are published in a book format and contain complex topics that lend themselves to a visual storytelling medium. Scholars recognize the diverse research field of graphic novels, and the current corpus of contemporary graphic novels has stimulated ongoing analysis and research, not only in Comic Studies, but also in foreign language education research. In her introduction of “the first English-language anthology that exclusively treats graphic texts of the German speaking countries,” Kutch (2016:5) states that:

critics worldwide have begun taking comics and graphic novels seriously and have increasingly secured the place of German comics and graphic novels in a globalized culture of comics [...] a wealth of secondary literature exists both in German and English that aims to locate comics and graphic novels within contexts of narrative theory, literary theory, and media studies. In addition to those, a number of

monographs and anthologies have also appeared in recent years that collect pedagogical studies and literary analyses of graphic texts.

In her article, Bridges (2009: 159) writes that when reading the graphic novel *Der erste Frühling* with literacy-oriented goals, students have a much-needed “*Erfolgserlebnis* at a crucial stage in their developing understanding of German language and culture.” Similarly, Ludewig (2016: 138) outlines methods for instructors who wish to use graphic novels to teach content in the German language classroom. Ludewig introduces *Operation Lækkerli* as a graphic novel that can be used to teach “students to analyze visual images and literary texts, improve skills of transcultural competence” while also recognizing German-speaking countries other than Germany, such as Switzerland. Krueger (2016) even proposes the use of graphic novels in the beginner and intermediate foreign-language German classroom for teaching East German history. These works, together with Kutch’s (2016) edited volume, show German graphic novels supporting teaching as the subject of an emerging field of study as they relate to and feature topics ranging from historical analysis to visual literacy. I propose adding Mikael Ross’s 2018 graphic novel *Der Umfall*¹ to the canon of pedagogically relevant graphic novels, particularly as an intercultural and transcultural text. *Der Umfall* lends itself well to *ab initio* teaching and can also provide a visual aid for students who wish to learn about the world of a person with a disability.² The main character’s disability, while never labeled, is understood due to the images which show what otherwise is invisible to others. Furthermore, this graphic novel was the first ever to receive a comic grant from the *Berlin Senate, Department for Culture, Education and Europe*³. It also received the best German comic *Max und Moritz Award* in 2020. *Der Umfall* has been recognized by *Der Spiegel*⁴ as a masterpiece, and critics praise it as an empathetic graphic novel portraying people with disabilities.

¹ Some reading excerpts from *Der Umfall* can be found at Avant Verlag: <https://www.avant-verlag.de/comics/der-umfall/>.

² Special attention was given in this article to ensure inclusive language according to the APA (American Psychological Association) <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>.

³ <https://www.mikaelross.com/ABOUT>.

⁴ <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/der-umfall-von-mikael-ross-ruecksichtslos-behindert-a-1233772.html>.

2. Graphic Novel: Introduction to *Der Umfall* and Neuerkerode

In the graphic novel *Der Umfall* (2018), Mikael Ross demonstrates the power of illustrated documentation by effectively rendering the protagonist Noel's life-changing experiences into a visual narrative. Noel's intellectual disability limits his communication with and comprehension of his surroundings, and his physical experiences in the 'real world' contradict how he mentally processes the changes in his living environment. His mother and sole caregiver suffers a head injury as the result of a stroke that leaves her in a coma, resulting in his loss of familiarity and safety. His disability prevents him from verbally communicating how he interprets the changes to his formerly stable environment, but readers gain insight into his mental state by means of the visual juxtaposition of the ongoing events and Noel's own understanding of himself coming to terms with the differences between his former and current life.

Ross's insights into Noel's disabilities stem from a two-year research study that he conducted at the real town of Neuerkerode, an inclusive town which is inhabited mostly by people with various disabilities who work there and make up the local social fabric. Some characters' medical conditions are revealed and identified, such as in the case of Alice, who suffers from chronic epileptic seizures. Some are visually narrated, such as in the case of Gitta, who frequently runs off and runs into people without stopping. Noel's disability is not labeled with medical terminology or socially appropriate jargon, but rather his interactions with his surroundings reveal his disability. According to the epilogue in his graphic novel, Ross was invited to reside in the town temporarily and contracted to visually document his encounters and interactions with both disabled and non-disabled residents (Ross 2018:126). A brief history of the inception of Neuerkerode is included in Ross's epilogue (Ross 2018:126-128).

2.1. Short Summary of *Der Umfall*'s Plot

On Christmas Day, his namesake and his birthday, Noel is gifted concert tickets for his favorite band AC/DC but on the same evening, his mother and sole caregiver, suffers a stroke and falls into a coma. Noel is forced to move from their apartment in Berlin to a small village called Neuerkerode. This town is populated and managed primarily by people with various disabilities. There, Noel must learn to integrate himself into the residents' community. He tries to adapt, but after he is rejected by his first love interest, he attempts to return to Berlin, to attend the AC/DC concert and return home to reunite

with his mother. His escape from Neuerkerode to Berlin is aided by Alice, who has fallen in love with him. They successfully arrive in Berlin and immediately return to Noel's apartment with the hope of finding Noel's mother, but new residents have already moved in, and Noel and Alice are arrested for trespassing. When they are taken to the police station, Noel is forced to realize that he has neither a home in Berlin nor a mother awaiting him there anymore. He and Alice are picked up by Neuerkerode caregivers and returned to the village. After Noel's fairy-tale-like dream, where he sees his mother in the form of a ballerina bidding him farewell, he learns to cope with her death and starts a new life in Neuerkerode.

3. Pedagogical Approach

To address *Der Umfall* in the classroom, I propose lessons that aid German language learners in learning linguistic and cultural conventions in the target language by gathering visual context through graphic novels. This process of reading graphic narratives allows for both visual and textual self-paced reception and integrates several skills: reading, both the written text and accompanying visual cues, interpretive listening, presentational speaking (in this case, by reading the speech bubbles aloud), and analyzing the images as parts in the dynamic process of meaning-making. Graphic novels can be seen in foreign language pedagogy as media “in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes” (New London Group, 1996: 61). In this sense, reading graphic novels in the target language promotes the development of functional visual, multimodal, and transcultural understanding, language awareness, and critical-reflective thinking skills (Elsner et al. 2013: 56). I refer to transcultural competence and transcultural understanding as:

the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form—ranging from essays, fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric, to legal documents to performance, visual forms, and music (MLA 2007).

Ross's graphic novel lends itself as a compelling pedagogical resource for offering an inclusive curriculum focused on a protagonist with mental disability. Learners gain a visual understanding of the protagonist's mental landscape through the use of fairy tale tropes employed by the author. The use of such tropes will be discussed in the next section to contextualize the pedagogical approaches further.

3.1 Fairy Tale tropes

In fairy tales, the social rules and expectations are flexible. Thus, interaction with anthropomorphic animals and mystical creatures is standard and accepted. According to Mattson & Tatar, fairy tales “create secondary worlds with an ontological grounding that accepts the supernatural as part and parcel of reality” (2016: 16). Ross makes use of this secondary world to demonstrate how the world of his protagonist with mental disability contrasts with the ‘real world.’ Another trope we find in fairy tales is upward social mobility, such as commoners becoming heroes. In this graphic novel, a protagonist with a mental disability becomes a prince after completing a heroic act. Ross employs varied fairy tale tropes, ranging from a heroic quest to save the princess, to encountering a witch, to the familiar happily-ever-after ending. Ross utilizes *absentation*, described as a hero or a family member leaving the security of a home environment, one of various fairy tale tropes identified by Vladimir Propp (1968), when Noel must leave his home once his mother goes into a coma. By employing fairy tale tropes to deconstruct the goings-on of protagonist Noel’s mind, Ross makes Noel’s world more accessible to the reader. Using this method, the learner’s reading experience becomes what Steven Pinker has identified as a “moral technology, a medium for exploring the minds of others, going inside their heads, and performing all the other strange empathetic acts” (Mattson & Tatar, 2016: 23).

Fairy tale tropes provide an ideal facilitator to discuss disability, especially when considering Schmiesing’s (2014:1) argument that “[d]isability is not unique [in fairy tales] but is in fact featured with great frequency in the Grimms’ *Children’s and Household Tales* (‘Kinder-und Hausmärchen’, KHM).” The significant frequency of disability in fairy tales points to the need for placing the disabled with the non-disabled into an otherworldly realm in order to display the social injustices of the ‘real world’ without open criticism of a specific place or time period. The primary locale of the Grimms’ fairy tales is the unknown and mysterious space in which the event occurs, where magical and celestial beings interact with nobles and commoners alike. In the fairy tale sphere, the social hierarchy is in place precisely to display potential flexibility such as a commoner’s ability to climb up the social ladder. The same applies to characters with disabilities, such as in the Grimms’ fairy tale “Thumbling,” the protagonist of which was born with an anomalous body that society views as a disability. Through the skills that he attains, the protagonist overcomes his small size. These characters in fairy tales are not confined by the limitations of their disabilities; rather, they challenge their marginalized

position and the mental boundaries set forth by society in order to step beyond them. In his graphic novel, Ross reveals the name of the place Neuerkerode, but the landscape and the setting in the graphic novel befit the backdrop of a distant fairy-tale locale. This heroic tale makes use of binary oppositions to work against social stigma. Noel, depicted as a hero despite his intellectual disability and unconventional physical appearance, challenges the conventional norms associated with heroic characterization. By challenging those expectations, Noel's character achieves social justice, and his visual transformation into a prince points to the equalizing nature of noble deeds, regardless of a disability.

The following are pedagogical applications that may be used in the beginners' level German language classroom. Educators are advised to consider whether sensitive topics in this graphic novel such as disability, illness, grief, and loss are appropriate for their learners. Since the didacticization remains provisional, these suggested applications are points of departure for lesson planning that can be modified as needed depending on duration, course objectives, and desired outcomes. Each chapter of the graphic novel *Der Umfall* contains various themes including fairy tales, experiences of mental disability, child-parental relationship, friendship, coming-of-age, diversity, death, and even a World War II concentration camp. A particular chapter and its corresponding theme can be used as an individual teaching unit within a sequence. Selected sections will be discussed in the following, which are applicable for beginners of German according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level A1/A2⁵ focusing on vocabulary acquisition, descriptive adjectives, comparisons, modal verbs, subordinating connectors, and cultural information.

3.2 Application in the classroom – Descriptive adjectives comparing fairy tale characters and Noel

Ross begins his visual narration with Noel's first encounter with fairy-tale characters in the form of nobles: princes and princesses who are manufactured, packaged items in a series of toys at a department store. Beginning with the opening panels on the first page, educators ask learners at beginner-level (A1/A2) to describe the appearances of these fairy tale characters using basic descriptive German vocabulary (Ross 2018: 3). After

⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>.

describing the dolls with elementary level adjectives, such as *schön*, *groß*, *klein*, etc., educators ask learners if these man-made dolls represent societal approval by fulfilling visual expectations for how aristocrats should appear in the target language, for example, *Sehen so die Adligen (der Prinz / die Prinzessin / der König / die Königin) aus?* Learners can be encouraged also to explain their views with the interrogatory word “*warum?*”. Their answers may be simple, short sentences since the purpose of this exercise is to review and/or introduce descriptive adjectives. Subordinating or coordinating connectors can be used and encouraged if the learners have already been introduced to them. Educators introduce the idea to learners that these male and female dolls represent visual perfection through their roles as nobles: their bodies are slender and they have perfect smiles, thus making them acceptable for mass consumption. What follows is a summary of what learners may not be able to express linguistically but they will be able to ‘read’ these visual cues. (A short discussion in the learners’ L1 may be helpful.) The princesses have long hair and wear royal blue dresses; their wardrobes are aggrandized with gold to make visible their nobility. Learners can also compare and contrast Noel and the store worker with the fairy tale toys and their position in the panels. The panel establishing this scene places the nobles high up on the top shelves, and Noel can only look up with desire at the unattainable aristocrats whose gazes are fixed straight forward, above him. The flow of the panels follows from the visual perfection of lavish princess gowns to imperfection, which is represented here by Noel’s clothing, a sloppily worn puffer jacket. This imperfection as a juxtaposition to the dolls’ perfection is enhanced by Noel’s puzzled facial expression. His appearance places him in opposition to the nobles and this is not only highlighted through his dull red jacket and his faded beanie, but also through his plump physique with his chinless face and unmaintained, thin mustache. The juxtaposition of Noel and the nobles sets the stage for the inception of the fairy tale motifs that will follow and lends itself to reviewing or expanding learners’ knowledge of descriptive adjectives.

3.3 Application in the classroom – Role-play

Educators guide learners to focus on the conversation and the interactions among the store worker, Noel, and his mother through role-playing, which requires learners to interpret the visual modalities in order to act out the roles as well as to engage with the text by reading the dialogues (Ross 2018: 4-5). By acting out the roles, learners not only position themselves as the characters to gain a different perspective, but they also empathize with

them. It is here that Noel's mental difference becomes clear due to his transgressive behavior. With his voice at the volume of a scream, which learners will be able to identify by the spiked speech bubble and lettering size, Noel asks his mother about his own age. His physical features, his rather obese frame, and his facial hair reveal his adulthood, yet the fact that he doesn't know his own age highlights that he is a person with disability. Additionally, his lack of vocal control illustrates that Noel does not comply to social behavior expectations. After role playing, educators ask learners to describe how they felt when acting their role, for example, *Wie haben Sie sich als Noel (Mutter / Arbeiter) gefühlt?* Learners answer in the target language with descriptive adjectives. These may be given to the learners as part of the preparation for this class. The follow-up reaction assignment is in L1 and assigned as homework to keep the classroom discussions in the L2. Learners describe their role-playing and the feelings they experienced when acting as or engaging with a protagonist with disability. According to Parrey (2020:44), "when one is disoriented, one feels something." And these emotions and feelings allow learners to "embrace the uncertainty and discomfort that can come with these moments" when engaging with disability (Parrey 2020: 54).

3.4 Application in the classroom – Descriptive adjectives to portray the relationship between Noel and his mother

Noel's mother does not answer his question, nor does she engage with his initiated conversation; rather, she directs him back to the task at hand and keeps him focused on the assigned duty to only get the amount of coal needed rather than the excessive amount he desires. Her next interaction with her son confirms that Noel is indeed mentally different from other adults, as she recognizes the need to remove Noel from distracting the store worker and does so by physically dragging him away (Ross 2018: 5). Noel does not refuse to go with his mother, but rather continues to scream with excitement. The interaction in these panels between Noel and his mother is vital. Here, educators ask learners regarding their expectations of a mother-son relationship: for example, *Wie ist die Beziehung zwischen der Mutter und dem Sohn?* Educators allow time for learners to read the visuals and assist learners by providing a word bank with descriptive verbs and adjectives, such as *böse*, *traurig*, *ärgern* to describe the mother's angry face when her patience is exhausted by Noel's repeated behavior. The panels show a close relationship that would be expected between a child and mother; however, this interaction does not correspond to the expected child-parent interaction because Noel is visibly a young adult,

although with the mental maturity of a young child ignorant of its own age. Educators ask learners to estimate or guess Noel's age based on two aspects: 1) his behavior and 2) his appearance. Learners explain their reasoning for their estimations and should conclude that his behavior is younger than his appearance. Thus, his mental age is younger than his physical age due to his mental disability. Comparisons of adjectives, in case they have been introduced already, can be consolidated here.

3.5 Application in the classroom – Subordinating connector

Noel's disability is revealed to the readers through visual and verbal clues directed at and controlled by the protagonist himself as in the following scene in which his social interaction with non-disabled characters suggests his mental difference. When inquiring about a product's location, he breaks with social expectations by using a grammatically incorrect subordinate clause when speaking to a preoccupied worker: "*Wo ist die Kohle? ... Weil wir grillen heute.*" (Ross 2018: 3). Educators assign learners to read the speech bubbles, the discourse between Noel and the store worker, to address the speaking component of this exercise. If the subordinating connector "*weil*" was introduced previously, educators ask learners if this sentence is grammatically correct, and then correct it. According to Kempen & Harbusch, (2016, Section 1), the subordinating connector "*weil*" is commonly used incorrectly in colloquial settings and more frequently incorrectly when there is not enough planning time or capacity to end the sentence. In the case of Noel, learners may assume that he does not have the mental capacity to formulate the sentence correctly. Educators direct learners to the fact that speakers of the German language commonly use "*weil*" incorrectly due to lack of planning time. This can further be supported by the fact that the store worker in this scene does not seem to be surprised by Noel's statement. The purpose of this exercise is not to support the incorrect use of "*weil*" but rather to draw attention to the time needed for formulating a subordinate clause using "*weil*" correctly.

3.6 Application in the classroom – Birthday celebration vocabulary and modal verbs

The birthday celebration scenes continue to portray the close relationship Noel has with his mother. These pages, six and seven, are suited to dismantling an expected 'traditional' birthday celebration (Ross 2018: 6-7). First, educators introduce new vocabulary covering the theme birthday in the target language, for example, *der Kuchen (die Kuchen)*, *die Kerze (die Kerzen)*, *das Geschenk (die Geschenke)*. Also compound words associated

with birthday, for example, *der Geburtstag + die Karte = die Geburtstagskarte* can be introduced. It is important for educators to point out the article of the compound word, which takes the article of the last noun in the compound noun. Then, learners are asked to guess why key elements of a birthday party are missing on these pages but also what remains by using modal verbs, e.g., “*Was muss eine Geburtstagsparty haben? Was soll man mitbringen? Was kann man schenken? Was darf man bei einer Geburtstagsparty nicht machen?*” Included can be the interesting cultural superstition of Germans not congratulating or celebrating one’s birthday in advance, by using the modal verb *dürfen*, for example, *Man darf nicht vor dem Geburtstag feiern*. Educators direct the learners’ attention to the parental relationship and the mother’s understanding of her son’s greatest joy, which she shares in by going to a heavy metal concert with him. This lesson could be concluded with a written reflection assignment in L1 that emphasizes that, regardless of traditions, cultures or, in this paradigm, disability, the essence of a good birthday celebration is the togetherness of loving family members or friends, in this case, Noel and his mother.

4. Fairy Tale Tropes: An Approach to interpretation

Following the initial foreshadowing of fairy tale elements with the prince and princess toys in the store, Ross introduces the next fairy tale element: the task of the hero. In fairy tales, the protagonist forges ahead to accomplish given tasks. Jack Zipes (1999:3) summarizes, the “protagonist is assigned a task and the task is a sign” that he or she must accomplish. The assigned tasks vary to include “three impossible tasks that are nevertheless made possible” (Zipes, 1999: 4). In *Der Unfall*, the three impossible tasks assigned to Noel are impossible due to his mental disability but like in a fairy tale, these are made possible. Noel, as the protagonist, becomes the hero by accomplishing the assigned tasks. His three given hero tasks are (1) to recognize the emergency, (2) to react appropriately, and (3) to succeed in getting help. On page eight, after hearing a loud noise while sleeping, Noel reacts by checking on his mother, the only other person in the apartment, and by attempting to enter the locked bathroom (1). Unable to enter, he looks through a window above the bathroom door and sees his mother “sleeping” on the floor. He knows that one normally sleeps in a bed, meaning that his mother’s sleeping on the floor is a bad sign. His first reaction is to panic, but he realizes that without outside help,

first, he must calm down (2). Once Noel overcomes his panic, he realizes he needs to communicate with emergency responders to get help (3).

Pages 10 and 11 describe Noel's next task and important cultural information that might be new to learners, namely the emergency center number for Germany. Noel understands he must contact the emergency center but is unable to recall the number due to his mental disability. He overcomes this challenge by visualizing and connecting with mnemonic methods. Noel's next task is to provide crucial location information to the emergency responders, namely: his address, for which he once again uses mnemonic devices to recall his street address, which is Karl-Marx Street. This is portrayed in the graphic novel by a bust of Karl Marx. After resolving the misunderstanding, the emergency responder dispatches an emergency vehicle, thus assuring Noel's success with respect to his last hero task. After arriving at the hospital and seeing his mother rushed off to receive care, Noel is left alone. He takes the golden foil blanket with which his mother was covered when she was carried off to the hospital and, like a Roman victor or a superhero, he drapes it over his shoulders as a cape (Ross, 2018: 14). He recognizes that this golden blanket was a magical agent used to save his mother. Noel is the hero who was called forth to help save his unconscious and injured mother. By successfully completing his three tasks, the hero becomes a prince even though he does not recognize this transformation until a nurse tells him.

4.1 Three Heroic Tasks applied in class

After reading pages eight and nine, educators ask learners to form pairs and think of a title for this section describing the action of this sequence of heroic tasks. Assigning a title to the scene will allow learners to sum up what has happened and focus on Noel's first task: becoming a hero. Next, educators show learners pictures of various emotions plus the German vocabulary word. They ask learners how they would feel in an emergency. Learners select one or more words. Then, educators ask learners what they do to calm down in an emergency or emotional situation, and how they would react to an emergency in German, for example, "*Wie reagieren Sie bei einem Notfall?*" By answering these questions, the class can establish connections and empathy with Noel's anxiety and decision-making process.

On page 10⁶, at the bottom of the page, the second panel displays Noel's mental process of attempting to remember the emergency number. Learners can see Noel's process, in which he visualizes three fish turning into numbers. Not explicitly revealing the emergency number in Germany (which is different than the one in the USA or in other countries) educators allow learners to decipher the visualization of the German emergency number. Learners can see and understand the visualization process necessary to prompt memory, in this case an emergency number. Learners will see that in the first row of three fish, two of them stand up with their heads angled to the left, and the third fish has its head underwater, facing downwards, but also to the left, with the end of its tail curved and facing left. In the first row, the fish maintain their appearance as fish, but in the second row, the three fish are starting to resemble something between numbers and fish. The third row shows the numbers 1 1 2 with only the fish's yellow color and positions of the fish remaining. Once the learners have identified and read Germany's emergency number, 112, educators can point to the vital cultural difference that each country has a different emergency number. The visualization of Germany's emergency number 112 as it is in Noel's mind shows his mnemonic method for memory recall and allows learners insight into his approach to tackle the task at hand. This exercise can also be used to consolidate numbers in German, as learners may wish to repeat various important telephone numbers. Another example of retrieving information from memory is Noel's attempt to recall the address. Educators draw learners' attention to the bust of Karl Marx in the center of page 11 and ask them to recall the name of the person represented by the bust based on that visual and Noel's clue: "*Der hat so nen Weihnachtsmannbart*" (Ross 2028: 11). Educators also point to the cultural fact that many streets in Germany are named after famous figures. Noel accomplishes his task to provide the necessary information on his own, however, he does need assistance with the house number and has to ask an older lady downstairs. Lastly, he must provide the emergency responder with his last name, which is Stock. This last name lends itself to a translation activity since it will need to be translated so that the learners can comprehend the misunderstanding in the first panel on page 13 between Noel and the emergency responder. *Stock* in German is the word for the floor of an apartment building or house, so when the emergency responder

⁶ This page is available here: <https://www.avant-verlag.de/comics/der-umfall/>.

asks for the name, and Noel replies “Stock,” the emergency responder reacts based on this ambiguity (Ross, 2018:13).

4.2 Fairy Tale Tropes: The Prince, the Princesses, and the Frog King

In many fairy tales in which the parents are deceased or will pass away, the child protagonist must adapt to a new living condition; the same applies to Noel when his mother is in a coma, and he is taken to Neuerkerode. Before departing for Neuerkerode, Noel is recognized as a prince. On page 22, the nurse points out to Noel that the length of this ring finger and middle finger are the same, and then states, “*Da wo ich herkomme, ist das ein Zeichen dafür, dass man aus einer Königsfamilie stammt. Das bedeutet, dass du ein Prinz bist, junger Mann*” (Ross 2018: 22)⁷. Educators direct learners to focus on the nurse’s appearance and describe her physical traits using descriptive adjectives, such as *lang, schwarz, groß*, etc., and nouns, such as *das Haar / die Haare, die Frau*, etc. Then, educators allow learners to guess the nurse’s country of origin. By drawing attention to her physical characteristics and actions, learners will recognize diversity in this lesson. The nurse’s physical appearance indicates that she is not from a western country, and she reinforces this with her spoken statement, “*Da wo ich herkomme...*” (Ross 2018: 22). The nurse indicates that Noel’s fingers show he is of noble blood, yet he did have to perform a heroic act in order to meet her so that she could reveal his noble heritage. By the nurse’s revelation, Noel is elevated to nobility, and this transition is supported by the golden robe (the emergency foil blanket) that he drapes around his neck as a symbol of his new princely status.

At Neuerkerode, more fairy tale motifs appear, including witches and princesses. While he is there, Noel falls in love with Penelope, who does not reciprocate his love. More important for the plot is another Neuerkerode resident named Alice, who does fall in love with Noel. The visual binary opposition of fairy tale characters becomes vital in understanding the societal expectations and challenges posited against them. Alice is visually placed into opposition with Penelope. Here, again, learners can compare and contrast visual expectations set forth by society, this time comparing the expectation of how a princess should look based on Alice and Penelope. For example, Alice appears to be a scrawny girl, whereas Penelope’s body is fully developed as a woman’s and her

⁷ This page is available here: <https://www.avant-verlag.de/comics/der-umfall/>.

appearance resembles that of Noel's mother. Alice may not change in size, neither growing nor shrinking like her namesake character in "Alice in Wonderland," but she does change her mood and her clothing. During the carnival when everyone in Neuerkerode is dressed up in costumes, Noel calls out to the princess, his unrequited love Penelope, to attempt to meet her (Ross, 2018: 51). Alice, dressed as a witch, pretends to help him since he could not enter a bus in time to chase after his princess (Ross, 2018: 53). But Alice, like many fairy-tale witches, deceives Noel by stating that she will lead him to the princess. After Noel enters Alice's domain, she attempts to fulfill his desire of meeting his princess. Nevertheless, Alice disguises herself as the princess and demands that Noel recognize her as one – or at least recognize her outward appearance as – "schön" (pretty), as all princesses appear. Just as Noel's mental disability is never clearly stated, Alice's disability is not disclosed in the graphic novel, but visually rendered through her exaggerated screaming, leading to an epileptic attack after Noel rejects her, despite her princess-costumed appearance (Ross 2018: 58-59). Even though Alice fails to capture Noel's heart during her first attempt, she continues pursuing him. For her second attempt, she sends him a representative of herself in the form of a frog prince figurine accompanied by a note of invitation (Ross, 2018: 62). Using page 62, educators ask learners to recall details from the fairy tale *The Frog Prince* or the elements of this fairy tale that are known to the learners. If time permits, and depending on their level, learners can read the shortened version of *The Frog Prince*⁸ tale in German to recall and to review the vocabulary needed to discuss this fairy tale. Learners discuss the role of a frog prince and the moral of that story. The learners should be encouraged to consider the 'inability' of the frog prince to perform human tasks in his frog form as a stand-in for 'disability', and subsequently to connect the story of the frog prince with that of Alice and Noel. Discussions about the differences and similarities between the two stories should lead learners to note the choice of the frog prince figurine accompanying the invitation. To maintain this discussion in German, educators collect the differences and similarities in plenum on the board. For example, this frog prince resembles Alice: his smile is as exaggerated, and his body is as scrawny as hers.

⁸ <https://www.duda.news/wissen/der-froschkoenig-kurz-und-knapp/>.

5. Conclusion

The proposed lesson topics were aimed at elementary-level German language learners who are able to gather visual context (image + text + dialogues) by teaching linguistic and cultural conventions in the target language with multiple modalities through *Der Unfall*. This graphic novel serves as a springboard into an inclusive curriculum as evidenced by the protagonist's intellectual disability and the real-life tales narrated by the residents of Neuerkerode, a village inhabited by people with and without disabilities. The author employs fairy tale tropes to visualize the mental processes of the protagonist and events occurring in Neuerkerode. Ross does not marginalize the main character with a disability, but rather positions him as the focal point in order to decentralize a non-disabled view. Thus, the text provides a space for evaluating, understanding, and empathizing with the experiences of a protagonist with mental disability.

The pedagogical applications outlined in this article are additions, enhancements, or expansions of lesson plans in place and should be modified as needed depending on the course materials, objectives, and desired outcomes. Through guided questions and tasks in the L2, and by comparing, contrasting, and reflecting on societal expectations in the L1, learners categorize and sort actions describing the literary trope which promotes evaluation of the graphic novel and the classic fairy tale genre. By these means, learners are reoriented with and repositioned within a familiar literary landscape in a foreign (German) social and linguistic environment that promotes their engagement and interaction beyond personal opinion and experience. The learners are involved in debating social norms through conversations in L1 and become active participants in interpreting and reading texts which integrate visual and verbal modalities in L2, not to mention even more complex interweaving of image and dialogue. Thus, learners gain an understanding of meaning-making and culture as “symbolically mediated through words, sounds, and images” (Kramersch 2011: 365).

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Biographical information

Kyung Lee Gagum is Assistant Professor of German, MSU Texas, Wichita Falls, TX. After receiving her PhD. in Transcultural German Studies from the University of Arizona in 2017, Kyung Lee Gagum joined, as a Teaching Assistant Professor, the Department of Germanic & Slavic Languages & Literatures at UNC at Chapel Hill. In August 2019, she then joined her current position at the World Languages and Cultures Department at Midwestern State University Texas as an Assistant Professor. Her research focuses on the transculturation of German literature in the Japanese and Korean visual culture of manga and manhwa, with a particular interest in how German Romanticism prompted the creation of new genre fusions with distinct educational goals in contemporary Japanese and Korean popular culture. She is interested in a multi literacy approach in the German

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Keywords

graphic novel, inclusive curriculum, disability, fairy tale, German for beginners